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Ethical Dilemmas in Academic Activity

Abstract. The nowadays academic teacher's activity is split between teaching activity, scientific research concern and institutional goals. As it appears in the studies focusing on academic problems that the teacher's orientation is going to be rather personal and professional than academic. The new generation of academic staff is trying to mix solutions in order to survive the ethical problems. Academic ethics seems to be in the middle of an important triangle: personal, professional and corporate ethics.

Keywords: Corporate ethics; Research ethics; Academic ethics; Academic career.

The importance of academic ethics is obvious especially in the research area. A lot of problems are targets for ethical researchers: fabrication, plagiarism, the data could be wrongly used or evaluated etc.

The new generations of teachers who are starting a university career are rather oriented to personal goals satisfaction then didactic activity or to the interest of the institution. The evolution of the Romanian academic level is going to reach a "business and research areas" and it is less interested in developing the academic teaching.

We need to analyze this orientation of the didactic stuff linked to their personal expectances.

In the Romanian academic system, the career evaluation is taking in consideration the following criteria:

- To have a rich research activity,
- To have a number of published articles,
- To attend national or international conferences,
- To publish scientific research articles in important journals,
- To be involved in grants, etc.

Less attention is paid to the developing of courses, the originality of ideas, the good pedagogical approach, the number of students who are reaching the classes, the update of the scientific information presented to the students, the good coordination of students' classes and activity,

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etc. Analysing the criteria we can appreciate that the academic stuff is encourage to develop the research activity (not in the benefit of students or of course to be taught) and to develop themselves as a professionalists and is not stimulating the teaching activity. As Kerr is pointing, the academic activity is generating rather a personal goal than an institutional one.

The first conclusion is that the teacher is forced by the academic criteria to be strongly oriented to the individual career (professional and researcher areas) then to the teaching career. The professional path will register projects, conferences, articles and grants. These are useful for the personal development but also for the institution's name. The teaching activity is considered to be a third priority in the academic achievements.

There is also the possibility to use the product of the scientific research in the personal benefit (as financial retribution) and in the benefit of research partner. This is the case of technical universities or medical schools. Most of the products are hunted by the industry corporations or other institutions. Some scientists sell first the product to the firms, sometimes working as consultants, and then make public in scientific journals their researches.

A relevant explanation is that the state is giving less and less direct support for the academic projects or retribution, to teachers are oriented in adding to their incomes projects and grants. Partnerships with Industrial, medical or economical developers become more attractive. A new ethical dilemma is coming to the surface: what is more important in the academic life: personal interest, professional interest, institutional interest, scientific interest or the financial one?

Considering the university's autonomy the analyse of differences between the public academic institution and the private ones could reveal a lot strong points but also difficulties and traps at this level. According to Kerr (1994)², there are at least four problems about academic self-government:

1. the contrast between industrial relations, "where ethical behaviour is defined as keeping your agreements, being considerate of your opponents and bearing in mind the wider ramifications of your actions. The purpose of negotiations in industrial relations is to get a set of decisions in accordance with which all participants can live and work effectively together for an extended period of time; the alternative is constant conflict, even chaos";

² Clark Kerr, "Knowledge Ethics and the New Academic Culture" in *Change*, January/February, 1994, p. 9.

2. the new generation for university teachers, and also university administrators or other staff members, “some of whom are more disposed to supporting their own welfare than to supporting that of the institution.” In this case teachers are “more reluctant to serve on committees and more reluctant to make time readily available when they do, and more reluctant to accept the responsibilities of writing good reports.

It seems that the personal affairs are more profitable than those of the institutions. In his article, the author considers that “faculty members generally are now more interested in the world outside their campuses and in the development of their disciplines and they consequently often neglect their campus responsibilities”

3. the rules against exploitation of university facilities for personal purpose are no longer so rigorously followed and seldom so fully enforced as they once were.
4. the fourth problems is “the general tendency among colleagues in academic life to look the other way about apparent misconduct, to find excuses if and when such conduct comes before quasi-judicial bodies of the university.”

It is generally considered that the academic community is one of the most open of all professional communities. A. Hamilton, in *The Federalist Papers*, pointed that “if men were angels, no government would be necessary”. We could make wider this affirmation to the academic area and sustain that the university problems must be helped to recover itself, because “no priesthood ever reformed itself” (William James).

The academic stuff is one of the most indulgent groups. We could think about the liberty in realizing the courses, in the modality of presenting information, in the way of expressing personal ideas, in the management of the faculty, in the academic citizenship, and in expressing political views. We can also remember C. Cucos’ idea that “the academic environment is one of the most manipulating”³ and persuasive that young men is having contact with.

It is obvious that it is a difficult approach to clearly separate between the teaching activity and research activity in the academic life. E. Ashby promoted “the Hippocratic oath for the academic profession” and he asked for a “declared code of professional practice”. This oath would apply restrictions regarding race, religion or political views.

³ Constantin Cucos, *Pedagogie*, Editura Polirom, Iasi, 1996, p. 108.

Most of the teachers are feeling the vacuum of the ethical codes, and especially the missing of the researches focusing on academic ethics. The need of “searching from inside” is appearing as a good point to start. Considering the research activity, there are common criteria for all ethics codes⁴:

1. competence: researchers recognize the limitations of their experience and make clear their professional roles and obligations;
2. integrity: researchers are honest, fair and respectful of others. They do not make statements that are false or misleading. Researchers strive to be aware of their own belief systems and their effects on their work;
3. respect for people rights and dignity: researchers respect the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality and autonomy, while being mindful that legal and moral obligations may lead to inconsistency and conflict with the exercise of these rights;
4. social responsibility: researchers are aware of their professional responsibilities to society. They apply and make public their knowledge as a contribution to human welfare;
5. minimizing invasiveness: researchers interfere with the participants or milieu from which data are collected only in a manner warranted by a research design that is scientifically credible;
6. providing participants with information about study: researchers provide participants with appropriate information about the nature and results of the research, and researchers attempt to correct any misconceptions that participants may have;
7. confidentiality: any promised confidentiality should be protected by removing personal identifiers and the use of techniques to limit inferential disclosure risk;
8. sharing and utilizing data: researchers inform research participants of their anticipated sharing or further use of personality, identifiable research data and of the possibility of unanticipated future use;
9. institutional approval: researchers obtain from host institutions or organizations appropriate approval prior to conducting research and provide accurate information about their research proposals. They conduct the research in accordance with the approved research protocol.

⁴ George T Duncan, “Is My Research Ethical?” in *Association for Computing Machinery: Communications of the ACM*; Dec.1996; 39, 12, ProQuest Computing, p. 67.

There is a simple check list – five up check list⁵ – published in *ITE Journal*, Institute of Transportation Engineers promoting the next five items:

1. it is illegal?
2. it is a win/win situation?
3. does it feel ok?
4. would you do the same thing if a loved one, friend or boss was watching?
5. when it doubt, don't!

Besides personal career goals, teaching activity and scientific research, the academic teacher has to consider himself as a member in a corporation. And a member of a corporation must think and behave like being one. In this kind of situation, the university must follow the business rules: they must have

- a profit,
- teachers very well prepared and asked by the academic milieu,
- the guarantee of quality of the product
- courses to train specialists appreciated on the market.

The self management and the academic autonomy determined the academies to become self managers. The state is less implicated in solving financial problems. “Public colleges and universities have been increasing tuition, aggressively pursuing corporate grants and commercial fund-raising, cutting the tenured academic workforce and privatizing services.”⁶

The campus is a unique type of enterprise. “It relies to an unusual degree on individual preferences toward conduct. It has generally effective legislative processes, less effective administrative processes and virtually no effective judicial processes. This is true for all guide-like organizations.”⁷

Thus the teacher becomes a manager inside the university, but also manager of his projects and manager of the discipline that he is teaching and the student group. Combining all these tasks, the academic teacher is shaping into a leader.

Are corporative goals more important than personal goals in academy?

Kerr (Change) is presenting the two types of academic teachers: “the old generation” and “the new generation”. The “new academic

⁵ Anonymous, “Ethics” in *Institute of Transportation Engineers, ITE Journal*, Jan. 2000; 70,1; ABI/INFORM Global, p. 26.

⁶ John Lee, Sue Clery, “Key Trends in Higher Education” in *American Academic*, 2006, p. 21.

⁷ Clark Kerr, op. cit., p. 10.

culture” seems to involve “less commitment to the local academic community and to citizenship obligations within it. Faculty members have more attachments to economic opportunities off campus or to off-campus political concerns on campus. The campus is more of a means to non-academic ends.”

The faculties need people converted to their needs. Many authors are blaming the young teachers who are giving up academic career in order to follow other professional duties, or young teachers looking for mobility and being mobile. “This new academic culture, says Kerr, places more emphasis on individual or group advantages and concerns, and less on the overall welfare of the college and university as a self-governing community concentrated on advancing knowledge. There are more nomads exploiting the academic environment, and the academic community is more fractionated into contending enclaves than has been customary in the past, and there are fewer ‘home guard’ faculty members”.⁸

The most important dilemma for academic teacher is the hierarchy of teachers’ goals. What should come first? Teaching, research, business or managing projects?

What can be postponed?

And what is allowed to be neglected in some periods of academic career, what is the risk and what is the benefit?

⁸ Ibidem, p. 11.